



Girl Connection

For those who serve adolescent females

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Iowa Gender-Specific Services Task Force

Setting Boundaries in Sexual Relationships

According to figures from the Iowa Department of Public Health (IDPH), total cases of Chlamydia, Gonorrhea and Syphilis reached record levels in Iowa in 2007:

- 8,643 reported Chlamydia cases – a 67 percent increase in reported cases over the last 10 years.
 - * 74 percent of the Chlamydia cases (6,350) were in Iowans aged 15 to 24.
- 1,928 reported Gonorrhea cases – a 19 percent increase in reported cases over the last 10 years.
 - * 60 percent of the Gonorrhea cases were in Iowans aged 15 to 24.
- 64 reported Syphilis cases – a 52 percent increase in reported cases over the last 10 years.
 - * 52 percent of the Syphilis cases were in Iowans aged 35 to 55.

This recently released data brings into focus the importance of giving young people ALL the information they need to protect themselves when they do choose to become sexually active.

For young women in the juvenile justice system, many of whom have experienced sexual abuse as well as other forms of sexual exploitation, there needs to be more than information about how to use a condom or what happens to their body if they get a sexually transmitted infection or “just say no.”

While the risk to one's health is serious, as evidenced by the rise in sexually transmitted disease diagnoses, it is often the emotional cost that takes the greatest toll on young women.

Because their sexual boundaries have been violated by others in the past, they may have great difficulty setting and maintaining current boundaries. For example, a 15 year old girl unsure of her boundaries and lacking the confidence to assert herself is at risk of being sexually exploited, particularly if she gets romantically involved with an older partner.

She may not feel she has a “right” to say no to sex with someone older. Certainly, she likely fears the loss of the relationship if she fails to acquiesce to their sexual advances and chances are she will not feel comfortable insisting that her partner use protection if and when they do have sex.

Whatever the specific relationship circumstances, adults need to be prepared to talk with these young women about some of the murky territory that can be present in their romantic relationships:

- 1) Personal values about sexual relationships. It is generally easy for them to say what they perceive they ‘should’ say, so present them with various scenarios where those values will be put to the test. This will help them determine their own boundaries versus what they have been told by others. Trying to live by others’ standards is a recipe for failure. If they are in a romantic relationship, use their current partner in the examples. Is there a time or situation when they would say no to their partner? If so, how would they go about it? Practice, practice, practice!
- 2) Your values. Share them but don't impose them, especially by implying you have all the answers. Remember, these young women may have already been sexually active against their will and if they feel you will judge them, they will likely become defensive or resist your help. Relationships are complicated. We all bring our own personal histories into them, and there is no one right way to do them.
- 3) Mixed messages. Acknowledge they are rampant in our culture when it comes to sex. It will be easier for her to sort out where she stands when she sees that any confusion she might have is justified.
- 4) Gender-based double standards. Confirm that she has every right to be angry about them. Females are expected to shoulder nearly the entire responsibility for saying no to sex. As they age and begin to experience sexual urges and pleasure, this double standard becomes more of a problem - creating additional confusion.

5) Sports as immunization. Seem like a weird idea? Maybe. But studies show that young women involved in athletics are much less likely to be sexually exploited. This is in large part due to the fact that they are able to see their bodies as strong and purposeful for more than someone else's pleasure. Involvement in sports will also help them be more assertive and less concerned about conflicts in relationships.

6) Do not assume heterosexuality. You know what they say about assuming, right? If she is homosexual, she is just as likely to struggle with relationship issues.

7) What do THEY want? So much of young women's time is spent thinking about pleasing others that they lose sight of their own needs. They may even start to take on the wants of their partner as their own - a sure sign that they need to slow down and sort out the direction they are headed.

Ultimately, dealing with issues around sexuality and relationships are complex and highly emotional even under the best of circumstances. Young women involved in the juvenile justice system are not generally in the best of circumstances. They need guidance and support from non-judgmental, non-exploitive, honest adults who are approachable and comfortable discussing what can be a decidedly uncomfortable topic.

For more information on the 2007 report of sexually transmitted diseases in Iowa, go to:

www.idph.state.ia.us/adper/std_control.asp

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